

News focus

GM tensions dig in

Several regions in Europe are seeking to declare themselves GM-crop free zones ahead of pending approval for the planting of such crops. **Nigel Williams** reports on the battles under way to try to limit their introduction

Plans by local authorities, towns, national parks and even states in Europe to set up genetically modified free zones to stop the controversial crops being grown in their areas are in deep confusion following new EU guidelines announced last month.

Combined with uncertainty over who would be legally liable if genetic contamination takes place and the World Trade Organisation's pending case against the EU, it looks increasingly unlikely that any European farmer will rush to plant the crops, even though it may be legal to do so within months.

A disparate European movement of regional authorities is rapidly growing to try to ban the crops on a local level. In Britain, Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, Lancashire, Warwickshire, Shropshire, Cumbria and

Somerset, have voted to set up zones. Many district and town councils, have also voted against the crops.

The assessment of GM crops in Britain has also been hampered by the resignation of one of the members of the panel studying the potential impact of such crops in the British countryside. Carlo Leifert, an expert in organic farming based at the University of Newcastle, left the committee amid allegations that he was facing pressure to toe the biotech line. The panel's report, published last month, found no evidence that eating modified food poses a threat to health and concluded that GM crops are 'very unlikely to invade our countryside or become problematic plants.'

However, critics said that the panel's research had not been rigorous enough to provide a solid

foundation for GM policy. The review is one of three strands of research - the others being a national consultation and an economic study - aimed at helping the government to decide whether or not to allow GM crops to be commercially grown in the UK. A decision is expected later this year. But British wranglings are likely to be overshadowed by Brussels, which will decide EU-wide policy unless there are exceptional local issues.

One region hoping to win just such status is Britain's Lake District National Park. The park has become the first such park to vote against such crops, and the Welsh Assembly has also declared its opposition.

Elsewhere in Europe, regions of Italy, France, Germany and Austria have declared that they will not allow GM crops to be grown in their areas. In many cases, the regions believe it would make commercial sense to be able to market their produce as 'GM free'.



Apprehension: The town of Kendal lies in the heart of the popular British Lake District National Park, which is seeking to ban the planting of genetically modified crops in the park. Evidence suggests that such a ban will be difficult to impose and that the EU will have the final say. (Photograph: The Lake District National Park Authority.)



Balancing act: the introduction of GM crops is premature according to managers of Britain's Lake District National Park which must cater for many different users. (Photograph: The Lake District National Park Authority.)

The English local authorities, which accept that they can only try to prevent farmers growing GM on the limited farmland that a council owns or controls, are basing their case on Article 19 of the Deliberate Release Directive 2001/19/EC. This states that authorities 'can request legal protection of their areas from particular GM crops'.

The government, however, argues that they may have misinterpreted the clause. 'The directive requires the authorities to specify conditions of consent including, conditions for the protection of particular ecosystems/environments and/or

geographic areas' says a notice from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, (Defra) posted on their website.

'To be consistent with the directive, any such request could only be considered if sound scientific evidence was put forward to demonstrate that the GM product in question posed a particular risk to the area in question,' it adds.

The inference is that 'sound scientific evidence' may not be forthcoming, but Defra hold out the possibility that the crops may not be approved at a higher level. 'In practice, the close

environmental/ecological proximity of the different parts of the UK and Northern Europe makes it likely that a risk posed in one territory would be a risk posed to the other area too – and this would make it very unlikely that EU members would agree to ... consent being granted at all,' it said.

Meanwhile, the European Commission seems to have scotched the idea of local authorities imposing any sort of blanket ban. In a recent test case, the Upper Austria region tried to declare itself a GM-free zone, but the commission refused approval following a report by the new European food standards agency that said there was 'no new public health or environmental related evidence that would justify a different approach being taken in Upper Austria than for the EU in general.'

This was supported by EU farm commissioner, Franz Fischler who suggested that regional and local authorities would not be able to ban the use of GM crops within their areas, 'unless they can prove it is impossible for them to be grown without contaminating conventional and organic crops.'

Presenting new guidelines on the co-existence of conventional and GM crops, he said the objective was to give farmers 'maximum freedom of choice to grow whatever crops were best suited.' He added, that farmers could get together in a region to prevent the crops being grown, but also said: 'If any region or member state [seeks to] use the co-existence rules to ban GMs by the back door they could end up in the European Courts.'

Friends of the Earth, which is seeking to persuade English local authorities to declare GM-free zones, said that the Upper Austria case and the EU guidelines did not prevent the crops being banned. The breadth of resistance across Europe, particularly from regions such as the British National Parks which have special status, poses a significant challenge to any EU decision to allow the growing of GM crops but the EU is likely to be the key arbiter on such issues.